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Talking to L.A.'s burning men of comedy  
 BY STEVEN MIKULAN  
 Wednesday, November 27, 2002 - 12:00 am



Photo by Debra DiPaolo

*You guilty scientists will destroy the world with your shameful secrets.*

—Joe Orton, *What the Butler Saw*

I'D KNOWN THE INTERVIEW WAS GOING TO BE different. My subjects, after all, were a quartet of sketch comics who liked to wear lab coats and burn things. Then there'd been the greeting from their e-mail that had arranged today's meeting: "Let Our Guns Do the Talking!" Such were my thoughts as I was led, more or less blindfolded, from the lobby of a reflective-glass high-rise in West L.A. into an

awaiting SUV. Only moments before, the building's receptionist had admitted that her request for me to sign in was merely a way to keep me "busy." "A satanic ploy," I joked back. One minute afterward, the cell phone that a ministry minion had handed me rang. A *satanic ploy*, its screen announced.

After a short, disorienting drive, I was brought to a corporate patio (Alphaville concrete, Sepulveda Boulevard noise), where I was allowed to see again and to meet the four 30-ish men who make up Ministry of Unknown Science, just as they removed their white biohazard suits and sat down to a table covered with Happy Meals, Transformer toys, glass beakers and a stainless-steel lab tray containing an E.T. figurine costumed in a dress.

Clearly, my faux-Huell Howser/wonderstruck-interviewer technique would be useless here. MOUS, as the group is acronymically known, consists of Dr. Fistula, Minister of Pink (Jason Berlin); Armitage Shanks, Minister of Joy (Rico Gagliano, who sometimes freelances for this paper); Professor T, Minister of Rage (Eric Trueheart); and Cap'n Shady, Minister of Water and Power (Timothy P. Walker). Describing them is easy and yet elusive. On the one hand, their elaborate stage identities as dubious scientists engaged in Mephistophelean experiments evoke memories of the band Devo. The ministers' preoccupation with pyrotechnics suggests at least some influence from San Francisco's Survival Research Laboratories, and their cross-cutting conversation also brings to mind the Marx Brothers and Firesign Theater.

On the other hand, their muse is comedy, not research, and science is merely a means to an end -- a TV show on the Sci Fi Channel or on HBO. Talking to MOUS is like getting caught in the crossfire of four weaponized clowns who are constantly engaged in topping one another. Subjects cartwheel from the digestive byproducts of Crunchberry cereal to an inflatable sheep the group

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had exploded in the Mojave -- as the ministers interrupt each other (and even themselves) while occasionally speaking into invisible microphones.

"We're not just a bunch of guys with a bottle of scotch and some gunpowder," Walker tries to assure, when asked about the group's safety precautions.

"We rule by allowing chaos," Berlin intones, to which Gagliano adds, "We don't believe in chaos theory, we believe in chaos practice."

"We're an oligarchy of plausible deniability," caps Trueheart.

When I inquire about the nature of the ministers' portfolios, each rattles off a résumé, while his colleagues mutter, "Lies, lies, lies."

"I'm basically the unstable mastermind behind the show," says Walker/Cap'n Shady. "I was a professional Boy Scout for a time, but then I decided to dedicate my life to drugs and alcohol, and came to California."

"But," counters Trueheart/Professor T, "he was asked to leave because of his religious beliefs -- he thought Sammy Davis Jr. was Christ."

BACK IN THE LATE 1990s, THE FOUR HAD BEEN toiling individually in the fields of the entertainment industry, making independent films, performing in sketch comedy and theater, or writing for TV. What brought them together was Gigsville, an L.A.-based community of desert-oriented artists, seekers and pyros who each year set up their own town within a town at Burning Man. "One year," says Walker, "we had a theme camp called Burning Scouts, which was everything the scouts weren't. We gave out demerit badges in homosexuality, lap dancing and unfocused rage." Walker's kaboomtown projects had already included "Morricone v. Esquivel," in which Cap'n Shady choreographed 100 explosions to music of the seminal composers, and "Burning Vanna White."

The ministers' alma maters range from Harvard to USC to AFI, but none holds an advanced degree in any of the sciences, although they all claim compensatory experience.

"I saw *Star Wars* 11 times," Gagliano notes.

"I used to masturbate to *Scientific American Frontiers* when I was a child," Walker confesses, "but that was more because of Alan Alda than the show."

Certainly, the ministers appreciate science's power and sex appeal.

"The greatest minds of the world are working really hard so people can take photos of their dicks," Trueheart points out. "People see scientists as the scary tools of industry or the government. These guys do incredibly powerful things to incredibly helpless people, day in and day out, for no apparent reason other than amusement and to line the pockets of George W. Bush. And we play completely into those fears."

To MOUS, the world's open to inspection, probing and experimentation. And so the ministry needed a laboratory -- a place big enough to live in and present performances, big enough to construct large sets and props -- and out of the way enough to avoid the prying eyes of fire marshals. More important, there were certain theoretical considerations: "We had a dream that involved chicks seeing the place and thinking it was really cool," remembers Gagliano.

The ministers found it in a corner of downtown L.A.'s artists' district, where friends and theater professionals gathered in a 6,000-square-foot space to help them build what became Theory Labs.

"All we did," Gagliano marvels, "was supply beer and pizza, and people showed up to work -- and we sealed the building and didn't let them leave until the job was done."

Theory Labs became a combination studio, construction zone and tree-house fort. "It's a home base for our artistic projects," says Trueheart, "with no censors or network people looking over our shoulders. One of our projects that we thought might never happen was to put a hot tub in the back of a VW bus. We cut the roof off, and now the hot tub is in. The first run of the heating units was done last night, and so far it's working out well."

"Ideally, you'd be able to sit in the hot tub and drive," adds Berlin.

MINISTRY SHOWS, FITTINGLY, ARE CALLED "experiments," and since coming together in 2001, MOUS has staged nine performances at Theory Labs, selling out most evenings solely through word of mouth and the Internet. The experiments have been preceded by a 1950s high school science film and

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a brass band or jazz ensemble. A MOUS performance is a multimedia concoction of sketches and videos. The live acts run the gamut from a rich couple's difficulty in manipulating their sexual surrogates to an elaborate giant funk musical number that requires the audience to wear 3-D glasses; videos lean toward the blasphemous side, as in one story about a young man's hassles with having Jesus as a roommate.

Although the productions require the support of about two dozen volunteers, the actual science is basic: a video camcorder, a video projector and a 933 MHz Apple computer loaded with Apple's Final Cut Pro editing software. Today, MOUS is ready to move its shows out of its headquarters and onto the road. This weekend it presents its latest experiment, "Bram Stoker's Bakula," at the Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society's convention in Burbank.

"It's like being in a band, only without getting the girls, the drugs and the money," Berlin says, reflecting upon MOUS's 18 months of existence.

"There's no one funny from California," opines Gagliano. "If you've noticed, everyone funny comes from the outside, and they come here to start their slow decline of wealth and unfunniness. We're at the beginning of that slow decline."

*Ministry of Unknown Science performs as part of Los Con 29 at the Burbank Airport Hilton and Convention Center, Academy Ballroom 1, 2500 Hollywood Way, Burbank, Saturday, November 30, 9 p.m. \$10 admission is good for the show and all convention activities after 6 p.m. [www.loscon.org/loscon/29](http://www.loscon.org/loscon/29)*

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